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THE EVOLUTION OF THE RELIGION OF ISRAEL

IV. DEUTERONOMY AND JEREMIAH

PROFESSOR GEORGE AARON BARTON
Bryn Mawr College

With the accession of Manasseh in 696 B.C. reactionary sentiment became for a time supreme in Judah. There were many causes which contributed to this end. Hezekiah had denied to many of the smaller towns of the land the right to worship in their ancestral high places and had made an effort to make Jerusalem the only legitimate place of sacrifice. This was naturally as much resented by the people of the provincial cities as an effort to close all churches in England except one central cathedral in London would anger the population of the provinces. It was a movement which imposed upon them great inconvenience and which struck heavy blows at local pride. Each city was naturally jealous of the honor of its own high place. In addition to this the reform demanded that the people of outlying towns should desist from hoary religious practices. It required them to believe that religion was a matter of the heart to a degree hitherto unknown, and that sacrifice was a ceremony, to be participated in only on the rare occasions when they went to Jerusalem. Such a religion the prophets of the eighth century had indeed proclaimed, but the majority of the population had never been seriously disposed to accept it.

Another strong reason for the reaction lay in the superstitious veneration of the people for their high places. From time immemorial these had been the abodes of Yahweh—the places where he was wont to manifest himself. Semitic conceptions of holiness led the people to believe that a sort of divine energy resided in the sacred soil of these places. If they were profaned or this energy were not propitiated, all sorts of disasters might be expected to overtake the neighboring towns.

Again, there were powerful priesthoods connected with these shrines. These were thrown out of business by the reform. When

their pockets were touched and their livelihood endangered, we may be sure that they did their utmost to inflame the pride, religious reverence, and superstition of the people to the highest degree.

Manasseh, sympathizing with this numerous class of his subjects, restored the high places, and gave the reactionaries the encouragement of his royal protection. A tradition preserved in different forms in different parts of the Talmud declares that the prophet Isaiah was put to death by him.

Reactionary movements generally carry their adherents, not simply back to their original positions, but beyond them, and the reaction under Manasseh was no exception to the rule. Worship in Judah reverted to barbarous customs, once practiced by all Semites, but which the Hebrews had, with a few notable exceptions, left behind them. The author of the Books of Kings tells us that the worship of Moloch, the god of the Ammonites, prevailed, and that the custom of sacrificing children to him was adopted. If, however, we take the evidence afforded by Jeremiah and Ezekiel, it is clear that the worship referred to was not that of a foreign deity, but was worship of Yahweh under the title *Melek*, or king, and that the children were sacrificed to him.¹ In the reaction Yahweh had come in the popular mind to stand for some of the crassest and most barbarous of primitive religious ceremonies. Such for the time seemed to be the result of the preaching of the great prophets of the eighth century.

In this dark time, however, the prophetic ideals did not die. Here and there faithful souls cherished the vision which the teachers of the previous generation had enabled them to see. According to many scholars² it was at this period that a prophetic voice gave utterance to the ethical definition of religion which now stands in Micah 6:6-8:

Wherewith shall I come before Yahweh?
 Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
 And the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?
 Yea, what does Yahweh seek from thee,
 But to do justice and love kindness
 And to walk humbly with thy God?

¹ See the articles "Moloch" in the *Encyclopedia Biblica*, Vol. III, and the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, Vol. VIII; the former by G. F. Moore, the latter by the present writer.

² Wellhausen and J. M. P. Smith, however, regard the passage as postexilic.

Such a statement gains great force, if uttered against a background of altars reeking with human blood.

Scholars are agreed that it was at this period, when much active teaching was impossible, that a disciple of the eighth-century prophets, or a group of disciples, produced the kernel of the Deuteronomic code, which consisted, excepting some later additions, of Deut., chaps. 5-26, and 28:1-46. This code was in an important sense the Book of the Covenant (Exod., chaps. 20-23:10) revised and infused with the teachings of the eighth-century prophets.

Among the many modifications which were introduced the most drastic were those which demanded a reform identical with that which had been attempted in the reign of Hezekiah and had so signally failed. The law which had permitted a multiplicity of shrines (Exod. 20:24-26) was transformed into a law which permitted but one (Deut., chap. 12). Pillars and Asheras, which Hosea had regarded as the natural accompaniments of a cult (Hos. 3:4), were to be uprooted (Deut. 7:5), and the social impurity fostered in the name of religion was prohibited (Deut. 23:17). Many customs of agricultural and social life had moved about the local sanctuaries as centers; in the new code care was taken that the centralization of the ritual should not work too great inconvenience or hardship. The ears of slaves who elected perpetual slavery had been of old pierced against a post at the local sanctuary (Exod. 21:6). Lest it should be a hardship to make a journey to a distant city, it was now provided that it could be done against the door-post of the house (Deut. 15:17). Formerly the local altar had been the sanctuary at which one who accidentally killed another could find refuge from the primitive law of blood revenge (Exod. 21:12-14). For such a man to have to flee to the altar in distant Jerusalem might, in a land where many were not Marathon racers, rob him of his one chance of life. Three cities of refuge were accordingly established to take over this function of the local shrines (Deut. 19:3-7). In providing for the feasts this code is more definite than the older requirements of J and E. They had simply required three feasts, stating that one of them should be held in the month Abib. Deuteronomy gives more

definite dates for the celebration of the other two festivals (Deut., chap. 16).

One finds a more humanitarian spirit in the code of Deuteronomy than in the Book of the Covenant. The work of the eighth-century prophets had borne fruit, and greater provision was made for the needs of the poor and the unfortunate. For example, a slave who, at the appointed year chooses his freedom, is not as in the older code, sent away empty (Exod. 21:4-6), but is to be given some provision with which to make a new start in life (Deut. 15:13-15). The needs of slaves, and even of animals, are thoughtfully considered (Deut. 5:13-15; 25:4). While this code was, we believe, formulated in the dark reign of Manasseh, the time to promulgate it had not come. The prophetic party must wait.

The long reign of Manasseh passed at last, Amon ruled but two years, and then the boy Josiah came to the throne. As he grew to manhood the advocates of purer religion discerned in him a kindred spirit, and when in his eighteenth year a royal order was given for the repair of the temple, the propitious time for reform was thought to have come. The new law was "found" there and read to the king. The king was greatly shocked. If this was really the law of Moses the nation was indeed in a sorry state, for it had never been observed. The days of paleography and of higher criticism had not then dawned. Desiring to know whether the new law was really the Law of Moses, Josiah resorted to a religious test; he submitted it to an aged prophetess named Huldah. She declared it to be the genuine law; it met her views of what the original requirements of the Mosaic code should have been, for it was designed to meet the needs of the religious situation of the hour as she understood them. Accepting this prophetic witness as to the character of the law, Josiah set himself to carry it into effect, and a great religious reform was undertaken similar to that attempted in the preceding century (II Kings, chaps. 22, 23).

It has been frequently said by those unwilling to accept the results of modern critical study, that if this is the true account of the origin and introduction of Deuteronomy the prophetic party was guilty of fraud, and, if guilty of fraud, the book would be

unworthy to form a part of divine revelation. This is not, however, a valid objection. Ethics as well as revelation has been progressive, and it is unfair to judge ancient men by standards which have become ruling ideals only since they died. The conduct of those who secured the introduction of Deuteronomy was quite in accord with the best conscience of that age. No man of that time stood nearer to the ideal standard than Jeremiah; no man in the whole pre-Christian period carried revelation forward by greater strides than he. Nevertheless Jeremiah, at the instigation of King Zedekiah, once took a course not in accord with the highest ethics (Jer. 38:14-27).

Five years before the finding of the law Jeremiah, then a very young man, had begun to prophesy. During the early years of his prophetic activity a great terror hung over the land. Assyria was rapidly declining in power, but hordes of barbarians were streaming along the Philistine lowlands and threatening to overrun the land; Herodotus calls them Scythians. Pouring into Asia from what is now southern Russia, they had half a century before this overrun large tracts to the south of the Black Sea; now they moved southward to the borders of Egypt (Herodotus I, 105). The earlier prophecies of Jeremiah are filled with gloomy forebodings of a disaster which is coming from the north, and it is probable that these Scythians were in his thoughts to be the agents of this catastrophe. The little book of Zephaniah, which is from beginning to end a gloomy prediction of woe, was probably written under the shadow of the coming of this horde. Perhaps it was fear that Yahweh was thus about to bring chastisement upon the land for not having observed his law that led Josiah so readily to inaugurate his reform when the law book was discovered.

The accomplishment of the reform undertaken by Josiah was no less difficult than it had been eighty years before when undertaken by Hezekiah. The same forces of personal convenience, religious reverence, superstition, and self-interest that had then defeated it were arrayed against it now, and years of strenuous labor on the part of the prophetic party were necessary to secure its observance. Into this work the young Jeremiah threw himself with ardor, and the notes of the sermons of this period which

the book of his prophecies contains have for their theme the various aspects of this struggle.

Just after the death of Assurbanipal (626 B.C.) Babylon had under a Chaldean dynasty gained her independence. Assyria during the next twenty years rapidly declined to her fall. The twenty-sixth dynasty, established now on the throne of Egypt, was ambitious to rebuild again Egypt's empire in Asia. Thus it came about that in the year 608 Necho marched into Asia with an invading army. Josiah, apparently thinking that the time was propitious to restore the empire of his great ancestor, David, met Necho at Megiddo in battle, but was defeated and killed. This is not the place to recount the political events which followed. How Necho for four years made Judah a vassal of Egypt, how he was then defeated by Nebuchadnezzar at Carchemish, how Judah passed under Babylonian control, how certain prophets and others continually sought by the aid of Egypt to sever the bonds which bound Judah to Babylon, how Jeremiah continually opposed these, declaring that it was Yahweh's will that his land should remain under Babylonian protection, how Jehoiakim and Zedekiah disregarded Jeremiah's teaching and brought on the captivities of 597 and 586, culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem, and how Jeremiah heroically suffered during all this time, are matters of common knowledge.

Jeremiah during his ministry advanced the religious conceptions of his people in several respects. He revived the main features of the teaching of Hosea, dwelling as Hosea had done on the love of Yahweh and interpreting the covenant between Yahweh and Israel as a covenant of marriage. In tenderness and depth of feeling he surpasses all his predecessors except Hosea. As the tragic events through which he lived drove Jeremiah to seek anew the foundation of life, he gained new light on five important points, advancing in as many particulars the progress of revelation.

Jeremiah was the first Hebrew known to us who reached a theoretical monotheism. Others, as we have seen, had been practical monotheists, but it remained for Jeremiah to declare that the gods of the heathen were vanities—mere figments of the imagination (10:15; 14:22).

The second point in which Jeremiah advanced the thought of his people was the declaration that Yahweh was willing to become the God of the nations as well as the God of the Jews—that he would welcome the repentant heathen to his worship (16:17-21). Since the recognition of this fact was necessary to the establishment of a religion that should be in any sense universal, this was a long step forward.

The third important point in Jeremiah's teaching is his conception of the inwardness of religion. To the prophets of the eighth century, religion was ethical; to Jeremiah it was an experience of the heart. To him the real covenant was not that at Sinai written upon tables of stone, but a covenant written upon the heart within; not a law imposed upon the heart from without, but such an experience of Yahweh in the inner man that one does right from the impulses which spring from the soul (33:31-34). Such was Jeremiah's conception of the religion of the future. The seer who could take that step in religious thought was surely one of the greatest of the prophets.

Because Jeremiah regarded religion as a change of heart rather than an outward institution the maintenance of the ritual became to him a secondary consideration. Isaiah had believed that the existence of the temple was vital to the religion of Yahweh, and the decimation of Sennacherib's army had vindicated this faith. So far as we can see, the destruction of the temple in Isaiah's time would have been disastrous to the Hebrew religion. Such a faith in the security of the temple might, however, lead to an over-confidence which would produce unethical results. Moreover the Mosaic covenant was now interpreted in a code which required the greater part of the people to dispense with sacrifice during the greater part of the year. Jeremiah, conceiving religion as in its essence inward, was able, therefore, to declare that if the people sinned the temple would be destroyed, and the event justified his belief. Dearly as he loved the temple he could see it perish without losing his faith in Yahweh's presence and power.

Jeremiah's other great contribution to religious thought was his assertion of individual responsibility. Among the Hebrews, as among other early Semites, the family or clan had been regarded

as the moral unit. Not only had Achan, for example, been put to death for his sin, but his whole house and even his cattle (Josh. 7:22-25). No very high type of ethical or religious life was possible until the individual was regarded as the moral unit, and it is to the credit of Jeremiah that he led in asserting this fundamental truth (31:29, 30).

In the year 592 Ezekiel, a young priest who had been carried captive to Babylonia five years previously, began to prophesy, and it is one of the distinguishing features of his work that he too championed the new doctrine of individualism (Ezek. chap. 18). Indeed he gives it a reasoned form and a detailed explanation such as the writings of Jeremiah, its enunciator, have not preserved.

During the last six years before the fall of Jerusalem, Ezekiel in Babylonia was ably seconding the work of Jeremiah. The first twenty-four chapters of his book come from this period. It would seem that frequent messengers went back and forth between Jerusalem and Babylonia so that Ezekiel knew what was occurring in Jerusalem, and his prophecies were known there. We learn from his book that the Deuteronomic reform and the lofty thoughts of Jeremiah had not touched the hearts of all. Women still worshiped Tammuz and men worshiped the sun and did homage to all sorts of animal totems, such as in primitive days their Semitic ancestors had thought to be an embodiment of their gods.

No nation moves forward in even ranks and Judah was no exception to the rule. Prophetic reformers might frame laws for the elevation of religion, and great souls might carry its thoughts forward to glorious heights, but among the rank and file custom and superstition must be slowly outgrown. The heights have no attraction for many and to break with the past seems dangerous, so they inertly perpetuate outgrown customs, which have become meaningless. Yet the future lay with the type of religion which the great soul of Jeremiah had discerned, which he had so powerfully taught, and for which through so many years he had suffered.